

2013

## Expressions 2013

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# Expressions 2013

DMACC Literary Magazine





*Nate Gainer - I Can Almost Feel You*

# Acknowledgments, Expressions 2013

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Nate Gainer - Self portrait

## Winners, Creative Writing Contest 2013

### **Scholarship Winners**

*1st place – Caitlin Hainley:*

“Sky Burial,” “In the Garden,”  
“The Definition of Nurse.”

*2nd place – Lindsay Simpson:*

“Fall’s Twin Sister,” “Glisten,”  
“Sing You Home.”

### **Poetry Winners**

*1st place – Cainon Leeds:*

“The Beginning...”

*2nd place – Case R. Henning:*

“Shopping List”

*3rd place – Brianna M. Brawley:*

“Unpeeled”

*Honorable Mention – Mary Rowan:*

“Until That Day”

### **Fiction Winners**

*Sarah Pillman - 1st Place:*

“Dust”

*Savannah Wood - 2nd Place:*

“Life without Andy”

*Jason Allen - 3rd place:*

“Chasing Golden Girls”

*Jennifer Stanton - Honorable Mention:*

“Roar of a Rabid Anteater”

## The Beginning ...

### *Cainon Leeds*

"I'll be back up  
in a little  
while," an old man  
says to his wife  
who has been dead  
for six years now.

It's subtle at  
first, the way the  
old man gets up  
at one o'clock  
every morning  
to make a  
turkey sandwich.  
Round the counter  
to the lazy  
white fridge. He digs  
mustard, ketchup,  
pickles, thinly  
sliced turkey, and  
mayonnaise out  
and slams the door  
shut behind him.

"I'll be right back,  
Honey," he shouts.

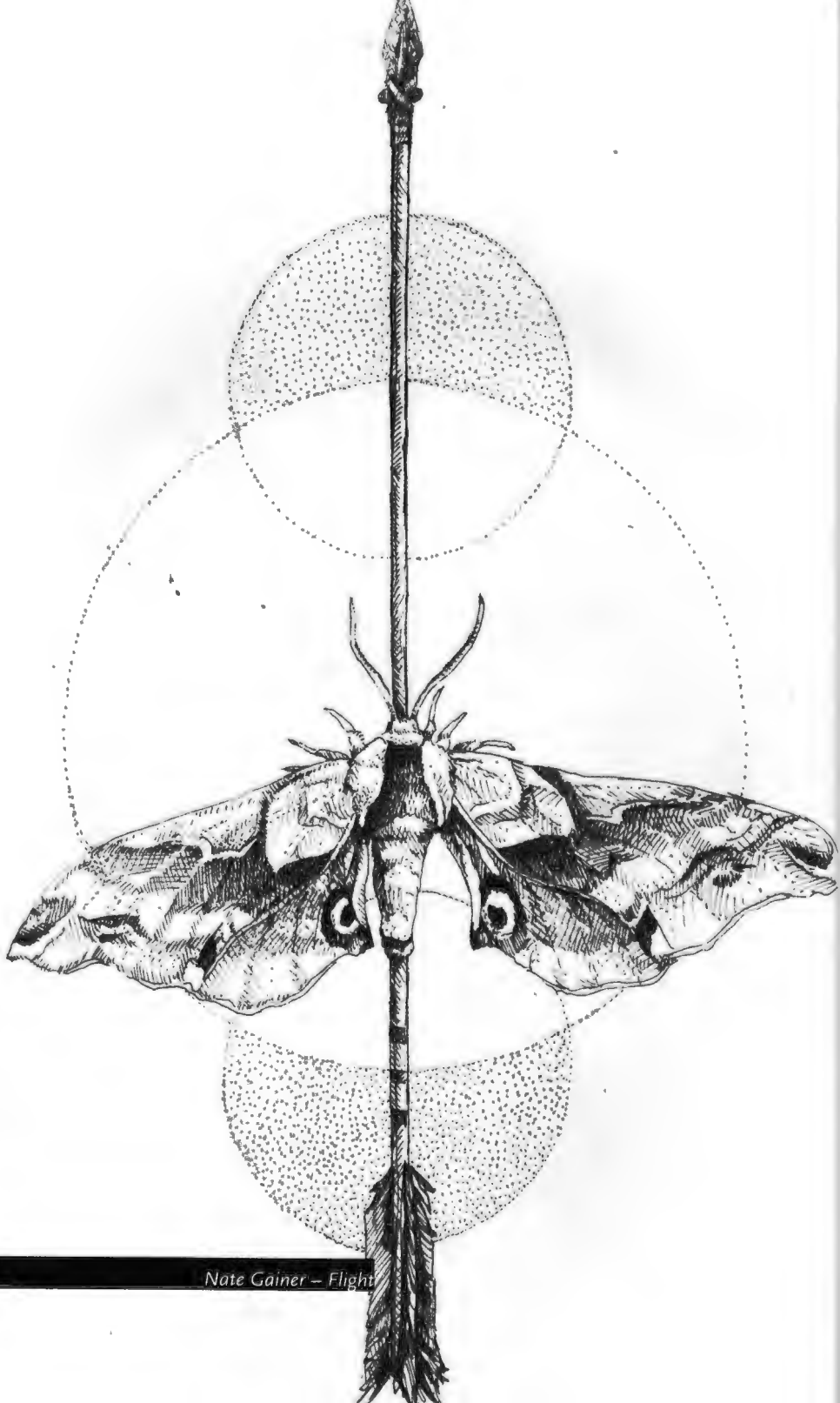
He forgets the  
bread at first and  
slops abstract art  
on the counter,  
but remembers  
it when he goes

to pick it up  
off the counter.  
His hard hands get  
sticky, so he  
finds the sink, the  
forgiver of  
all kitchenly  
sins, and thrusts his  
calloused hands in  
freezing cold water,  
rinsing them clean.



*Brittney Mecham – Antiqued*





Note Gainer - Flight

## Sky Burial

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*Caitlin Hainley*

When Ed Harris visited Tibet in 1938 as a photographer for the last Everest summit before the mountain was closed off by the war, he fell in love with one thing - Nam-kha Chola, or spacious-sky-under-the-big-bird's-wing. She was eleven years old and stood at the edge of a cliff near a shack that sold tea, wearing a traditional black skirt, red blouse, and multi-colored apron accented with gold thread. Her hair was thick, black, and long; her skin the color of a sapling oak in spring. Her eyes were clear and her face was slightly more round and flat than many of the Tibetan people Mr. Harris had seen. It was this very characteristic of round flatness that made her seem beautiful and exotic to every foreigner she would meet, and marked her as ugly in her own culture.

When Mr. Harris asked about her, the translator relayed to him that her parents owned the teahouse and Nam-kha Chola worked the tea fields, cleaned the shack, and ran tea to the priests at Sky Burial. When he asked about the prospect of adopting her as his daughter and bringing her back with him to the U.S., the translator looked at him carefully and told him that few things in Tibet were without a price.

Nam-kha Chola was not the oldest daughter, nor was she the youngest, and her parents already had a son. "She is the ugliest," they said to each other, "we can have more daughters, but we may never again have such an opportunity as this," and so they gave her to Mr. Harris for forty dollars.

“Are there mountains where we are going?” asked Nam-kha, “Is there an ocean?”

Mr. Harris looked at the translator and smiled, “Where we are going there are oceans of corn and mountains of snow.”

The translator looked at Nam-kha and smiled, “Where you are going there are mountains of good fortune, oceans of opportunity.”

Nam-kha Chola was quiet on the journey home, but found many ways to make herself useful. She was skilled in starting fires, laundering clothes, cooking dinners, tidying tents, sweeping floors, and serving tea. She held up better on the sea voyage than many of the summit party and would slip away during still moments when work was done to gaze up at the sky. Often, when Mr. Harris stood back and watched from afar, he would see Nam-kha lift her face to the sky, eyes open, head tilted, and raise one arm palm-up to grasp the wind as it sifted by. Catching his breath, Mr. Harris would shiver and gaze upward, expecting to see something graspable.

From Tibet, they had made their way to the sea and then on to England, where they said their good-byes to many of their companions, and then sailed on to America. Almost as soon as they set foot on the soil of Virginia, Mr. Harris placed Nam-kha in the care of the Chatham Hall School for Girls, for although he had a keen eye for beauty and he truly loved Nam-kha, he had no idea what to do with an eleven-year-old girl.

Life in Chatham Hall was not easy for Nam-kha, but it was to her advantage that so far nothing else in life had been, either. She had few expectations but she was a hard worker and smart and, unbeknownst to her, beautiful. She quickly earned the trust of the schoolteachers, and, upon mastering the English language, found a rapt audience for which to spin the tales she had heard as a child.

The children loved all of her stories, but were most in awe when Nam-kha told them the story of Jhator.

“The gods had many sons and each son was given a task to gift the people of the earth. One son was given a spear to throw at the blackness of every night sky to let the light through that we would have stars. One son was given seeds to place on the belly of each sleeping bride that she would grow a fat baby to give to her happy husband. And one son was given a flask to wet the lips of each man, woman, and child, so they would never grow old—eternal life. But the third son, whose name was Dakini, did not like to work. He instead spent his time dancing and sleeping, and soon the bodies of the old and the dead began to cover the earth because the water of the Gods did not wet their lips.

When the other sons saw that the great piles of the dead were overshadowing their gifts to the people, they devised a plan to punish their brother and to again make the earth beautiful. They found a small carrion-eating bird and took its skin. They stretched the skin slowly each day until at last it was big enough for a man. They waited until Dakini was sleeping and then they threw the skin over him and sewed him inside so that he could not escape.

‘Now you must clean up the mess you have made,’ said the brothers. And from that day forth, Dakini danced through the sky, devouring the dead, and cleaning the earth through Jhator, Sky Burial.”

The year Nam-kha Chola turned sixteen, Mr. Harris came to Chatham Hall to bring her home with him. He had not seen her in five years and could not help but notice that a rounding of her hips and of her breasts now joined the roundness of her face. He had traveled on many expeditions during their five-year separation but nothing he had seen—the pearlescent mists of the

falls at Niagra, the sparkling expanse of the Alaskan tundra, the brightness of a tiger's eyes as it slunk through the cool jungle, and the many ladies dark and fair who had vied for his attentions—did Ed Harris love as he loved Nam-kha Chola.

He married her the day he took her from Chatham Hall and then brought her with him to his home outside of Valmar, Iowa, near the Chichaqua bottoms greenbelt. He owned over two hundred acres there of farmlands, woodlands, river valleys, and overlooking cliffs. When they arrived at his home he did not take Nam-kha directly inside, but instead led her around the back and down a path, then up a path until they reached a summit peak overlooking the South Skunk River. They could see for miles the snake of the tree-lined river as it wove itself through fields of prairie and of corn. "Oceans of corn," Mr. Harris said. "Mountains of opportunity," Nam-kha whispered back. And they made love there as Nam-kha looked up to the spacious sky, as they fell under and out of again the shadows of the birds flying overhead.

**The bird relayed  
to her the words  
of the spirit of the  
mountain and the  
spirit of the wind  
and how he had  
kept the fire  
strong throughout  
the night.**

In Valmar, the people only knew Nam-kha as Mrs. Harris. To them, she had never been a girl, a daughter—only a wife and now soon to be a mother. Nam-kha kept busy at their small farm. There was a cow to milk twice a day, chickens to feed, eggs to collect, a garden to plant and weed and weed again. There were clothes to be washed, and meals to cook, and dishes to wash, and animals to be slaughtered, and food to put up, and a house to clean, and clothing to mend and sew and mend again. And during still moments when work was done she would slip away to their cliff to gaze up the sky.

When the baby was born, Mr. Harris named him Adam, but Nam-kha called him Cetan, meaning 'hawk.' "Adam is for those who came from the earth and return to the earth," she told him. "My people are people of the sky." Cetan was a lively baby. He was dark like his mother and thoughtful like his father; he was chubby and round with thick, black hair that tufted up from his head like the soft down of ducklings. The baby grew into a boy who followed his mother everywhere: she taught him all she knew about the earth and the seasons, about men and about beasts, and she spun for him the tales she had heard as a child.

"After Dakini was given the task to clean the earth, he flew far and wide to accomplish his purpose. Because there was no one left to wet the lips of each man, woman, and child with the water of the gods, no one lived forever and there was always work to be done by Dakini.

On one of his flights he saw someone lying by a fire. He soared down and began hopping closer to the fire. As he began to get quite close, he heard the voice of the spirit of the mountain talking to the spirit of the wind. 'Let us put out this woman's fire,' said the mountain, 'for I am lonely and if there is no fire there will be nothing for this woman to do but freeze and stay here with me forever.'

'But how can we do that?' answered the wind, 'for the fire is stronger than I am and only gains more strength the harder I blow. Then the two devised a plan that the mountain would shift ever so slightly and with each shift the wind would blow a small amount and with each shift and each blow a small spark would leave the fire until at last the fire would have no spark left and be put out.

Now it was the job of Dakini to clean the dead from the earth, but Dakini never took life from those living, for Dakini had grown in kindness since his time in the skin of a carrion bird;

so he resolved to keep watch, and each time the mountain shifted and the wind blew and a spark left the fire, he used his head to roll the spark back in, and in this way he kept the fire going throughout the night.

In the morning as the sun rose, the woman awakened to a large bird standing very near her fire. 'What are you doing here?' the woman asked, and the bird relayed to her the words of the spirit of the mountain and the spirit of the wind and how he had kept the fire strong throughout the night.

'But you are Dakini,' said the woman, 'How do I know that you were not in league with the mountain and the wind, and were waiting for Jhator to clean my bones from the earth?' And the Dakini bowed his head and showed her where the sparks that he had rolled back to the fire had burned away his feathers, leaving him scarred and bald.

'Truly you speak the truth,' said the woman, 'and because you saved my life, I will give you mine. Make me such a bird as you are and we will clean the earth together.' And so Dakini, son of a god, made the woman into a being like himself, and together they danced through the sky, clearing the dead from the earth."

When Cetan was four years old, in the summer of 1949, he went to Valmar with his father to buy his mother a present for her birthday. He had five cents that his father had given him, and in the way all children do when they believe a pittance can buy the moon, he had grand visions of buying a golden chain for his mother. And as his thoughts went forward and back through all of the great things five cents would buy, he raced excitedly into the street and in front of an oncoming car.

In the hours that followed Ed Harris did not want to believe his son was dead, but he did. Nam-kah Chola could not. When she was told, she fell to her knees and closed her eyes and thought of the blue sky

and the green fields, of her son's voice, of holding his chubby hand still padded with the bit of fat from his baby years. She asked to see him and they took her to the church where funerals were held and stood back slightly as she gazed at the stillness of his face, lifted his arm, squeezed his hand and then let it drop, watching to see that no life fought the gravity of death as his limb fell back beside him. She asked for his body but they wouldn't give him to her, and so she attended their funeral for Adam with lifeless eyes but a racing mind.

The night of the funeral, Mr. Harris woke in his bed alone. His first thought was that his wife was comforting Adam in their son's room. As four-year-olds will, Adam was prone to waking in the night, and Nam-kha never hesitated to hold the boy and soothe him to sleep by her gentle strokes and familiar smell. But when he remembered that Adam was dead, he sat upright and called for Nam-kha - no answer. He looked through the house and the buildings. He drove to the church and then to the graveyard and there he saw his son's grave uncovered, dug up, casket open, Adam gone.

He got in his car and raced home as the sky began lighting from black to grey and then to dusky purple. As he drove home he noticed vultures circling some distance from his house up toward the tree line of the river. He parked at home and ran around the back of the house and down a path, then up a path until he reached the summit peak overlooking the South Skunk River. There he saw Nam-kha Chola kneeling on the ground, back to him and facing the outer edge of the cliff toward the river, axe to one side, butchering knife to another. Pile of clothes to one side, striped flesh of his son to another and his wife in the middle of it all, silently crushing the last of the bones of his son between the rock of the cliff and the rock in her hands, crushing and then making a paste with liquid from a bowl slightly in front of and to the left of her.

The sky lightened to pink and to orange and blue and, silhouetted against the sky, covering the branches of what seemed every tree, were the hulking shapes of turkey vultures watching his wife in silence.



Nam-kha stood and turned to look at her husband. "Jhator," she said to him in a voice that froze him to the place he stood. Then she addressed the birds in a language he did not know - only one word, which he had heard before. Dakini. She stepped over and joined him where he stood as the birds stretched their wings, floating down from the trees like the cotton falling from cottonwood trees in early fall.

Mr. Harris watched. The scene cut his breath short, awed and disgusted him. In all his years, of all the things he had seen, he had never seen anything such as this, and his wife became more mysterious to him than she had ever been, a mystery farther from him than the plains of corn in Iowa were from the Mountains of Tibet.

He looked at Nam-kha, her clothes bloody, her round face streaked with sweat. Her eyes were clear and steady as she watched the vultures, a dark cloud on the cliff. The birds ate silently and stood waiting until the last one finished, and together they spread their massive wings, raised their bald heads, and flew up, the only sound heard: that of rustling feathers, rushing wind.

And all that was left was spacious sky under the big bird's wing.



Nate Gainer - The Strongest

## Sing You Home

---

*Lindsay Simpson*

This morning calls for crying.  
This morning I call into question what is fair  
and what makes me sick.  
Why a young woman, budding with hope,  
lies in a morgue.  
Why her son never gasped for air, couldn't swim to the surface  
and why we feel such grief for a baby we never met.

I think about how she was alone.  
I wonder if she knows how people mourn for her, light candles for  
her, wail and scream for her.  
How, for her family, breathing feels like an exercise in suffocating.  
Let this poem tell her now.

I don't know what kind of music she liked, or if she'd lovingly  
assembled his crib.  
Maybe she already chose the clothes that would cover him  
after his birth.  
We cry for that little boy who won't be held, won't leave the warm  
womb his mother grew him in.  
We cry for her mother, who's lost her only daughter.  
The mother pleads, prays, and wishes this nightmare on no one.  
The mornings blend into nights. She feels guilty for eating, for  
thinking of anything but her murdered daughter and the grandson  
she longed to hold.

All the wishes and worries surface now.  
I wish I'd said goodbye.  
I wish I'd told her I loved her more.  
I wish that baby could have been born.

I worry she was aware she died alone.  
I hope she and the boy clung to one another as they passed, their  
spirits intertwined as flesh and blood, mother and son, two people  
leaving this world together in one body.

We hate the violence, shudder at the madness some carry.  
Fire spreads, burning compassion and reason.  
We'd like to play soft notes on a piano for her, to climb higher and  
higher until safety distances her from harm.  
Until the melody fades away, taking our grief with it.

Let peace come. Let light in.  
Be not afraid of the unknown.  
Wish for hope, and hope for grief to share space inside with love.  
Let us remember you.  
Let us sing to you,  
sing for you,  
sing you home.



*Sydney Bardole – Beauty in Progress*

## Unpeeled

---

*Brianna M. Brawley*

It was vulnerable times when  
My heart was like a sticker.  
Others had handled it  
So carelessly through the years  
I surprised myself when I  
Carefully unpeeled it from  
the plastic sheet of my chest.  
I stuck it to my sleeve to  
wear only when I was around You,  
You held my hand with one of  
Yours, and took my heart with the other.  
You sifted through junk drawers  
To find super glue, because  
Lint and prints polluted my heart.  
The adhesive side too short of pristine.  
You said you'd never have the need  
To unpeel my heart from  
That spot on your chest.  
And I said I'll handle yours so  
Carefully though the years.  
So you stuck my heart there  
And pressed.



*Nate Gainer – Encompass and Eclipse*

## Chasing Golden Girls

*Jason Allen*

A month in London had not been kind to me. A summer fling had lured me across the pond with her dimples. Her mesmerizing Irish-inflected discourses on the superiority of Elvis Costello's *Imperial Bedroom* to his earlier albums hadn't hurt her cause either. But our romance had fizzled because one of the world's great cities has many and varied diversions for a twenty-four-year-old to stumble on. I did not stick the landing. I found myself suddenly alone and without an anchor, several thousand miles from my friends and family. Determined to seek what adventure I could before my meager funds were exhausted, I purchased the cheapest ticket east I could find. Later that day I was walking the cobbled streets of Amsterdam.

Luck traveled with me that day. Lodging and employment were both on offer at a bar off the Rozengracht called Café Sound Garden. The bar owner, a heavily-tattooed, barrel-chested behemoth by the name of Niels, had found in me just the right mixture of amusing and pitiful to offer me a job. At that time the only beverage he served was beer, so my lack of bartending experience was not an issue. Niels, a former musician, catered to my people: hipsters, punks, mods, metalheads, greasers and hangers-on. My sickly green mohawk was right at home in a sea of liberty spikes, mop-tops, and immaculately coifed pompadours.

The pay was a joke, as I was working illegally, but he did allow me to stay in a room which was the size of a smallish walk-in closet above the bar. The wallpaper was at least a dozen layers thick,

every one of which was visible at various points, due to a prolific case of peeling. The hardwood floor was marred by a series of deep scratches that ran the length of the room, from the door right up to the wall. I never did find out how those had gotten there or why, but I pictured some poor three-fingered specimen who had been forcefully dragged out of the room to a sinister fate I could only imagine. The only source of light was a naked light bulb with a chain hanging from the ceiling.

I dumped my backpack and guitar on the cot, which was only slightly more yielding than the floor, and taped a tattered picture of my hero's, the Arctic explorer Ernest Shackleton's, ship *The Endurance*, on the wall. This would be my base camp for the duration.

An art history class a few months prior had sparked an interest, so I was excited about my proximity to several world-class museums. I had read about many of the works that were now within walking distance. The Van Gogh museum had the largest collection of his paintings and drawings in the world. The Anne Frank Museum was another attraction that I was looking forward to seeing. The crown jewel, though, was the Rijksmuseum. The state museum of the Netherlands, it housed masterpieces by Rembrandt, Vermeer and Steen, as well as many historical artifacts from the Dutch Golden Age. One of the most famous paintings in the world was on display there, *The Night Watch*, by Rembrandt van Rijn.

Niels had given me a day to explore and acclimate before I started pouring pints, so I decided to check out the Rijksmuseum. It was about a twenty-minute walk. I was hoping to get my creative juices flowing again. I had brought my guitar with me from San Francisco, but hadn't touched it except to lug it from place to place. Music had always been a source of relaxation and enjoyment, but my time in London had somehow sapped me of my desire to indulge in this creative outlet.



The outside of the building was an implacable wall of brick and masonry. The glass of the windows was tinted black and stood out like missing teeth against the white stone. As I approached the entrance I was engulfed by a throng of what I believe were Japanese tourists. They swarmed past me, swiveling this way and that, devouring everything in their path with their digital cameras. The tone in their voices betrayed a glee that made me a little jealous.

Stepping inside, I crossed into the inner sanctum and was met with an arid wave of sterile air. I reasoned that the paintings would fare much better without any moisture to infect the canvas with unwanted organisms, myself included. Ascending the stairs yielded the first room. There were rows of paintings on the wall. Each one was nestled safely behind a pane of glass like a smear on a slide, ready to be put under the microscope.

Following the crowd brought me to a large room with blank blue walls. All the artificial lighting was directed at the far wall where a huge canvas was perched. This was Rembrandt's masterpiece *The Night Watch*. The thing was massive. I stood there, inert, staring at it for quite some time. My mind wandered a bit, ticking off a grocery list and wondering where I might buy some guitar strings. Here I was, in one of the great museums of the world, and my thoughts were centered on kale and cabbage.

I tried to focus on the beauty that was in front of me, but the thing on the wall stirred nothing in me at all. One of the central figures in this

**A nonchalant glance  
at those around me  
revealed rapture on  
some faces peering  
up at the painting,  
while others seemed  
deep in thought,  
penetrating the  
secrets that  
remained such a  
mystery to me.**

painting was a little girl in a golden dress. The golden girl and I stared at each other indifferently. Her gaze was cold and clear. There was a slight sense of motion in the painting, but I couldn't hold on to it. It flitted on the edge of my consciousness, just beyond my grasp.

A nonchalant glance at those around me revealed rapture on some faces peering up at the painting, while others seemed deep in thought, penetrating the secrets that remained such a mystery to me. The Japanese were clicking away furiously while adhering to the no-flash rule, which was in place and enforced by a glowering guard on each side of the painting. The awe I had anticipated never materialized. In its place was a dim awareness that I was alone in a crowded room. Eventually I gave up, slinking back down the stairs and out the front door.

A few minutes later found me outside a coffee shop down the street, sitting sullenly with my macchiato. The breeze carried the smells from the freshly cut grass at my feet and the sweet aroma of thick, buttery air from the bakery two doors down. The pitted stones of the cobbled street were an earthy brown, shimmering with bits of broken glass. A business man in a finely tailored suit strode by, his expressionless gaze fixed firmly ahead. What he seemed to lack in personality, he made up for by exuding a confident air of purpose. I imagined him as a mid-level executive in some global conglomerate who spoke rarely and only in clipped, staccato sentences.

An old man trawled slowly by in the canal, his motor boat chugging along as he whistled a leisurely tune through the gaps in his smile. I couldn't help but smile back. He doffed his cap and I wished my Dutch was sufficient to wish him a good day without inadvertently insulting him in some obscure way, so I settled for a solemn salute to send him on his way.

The bright orange dress of a little girl caught my eye. Her golden hair was up in a bun and bobbed up and down as she walked. A boy, her little brother by the look of him, was walking beside her.

They were followed by a woman who seemed a bit preoccupied. Both of the children were totally absorbed by the ice cream cones in their hands. The boy's cheeks were covered in chocolate.

As they passed in front of me, the little boy tripped on a crack in the pavement. The seconds felt like minutes as the ice cream slipped from his grasp and plummeted to the ground. It landed in the grass at my feet, the cone pointing up to the sky. He picked up the empty cone, eyes blinking wildly in disbelief. Most of the ice cream was still on the ground, covered in grass. Our eyes locked for a moment. His lips weren't trembling. There were no tears welling.

A look of profound sadness passed over his face. It was a very adult expression that seemed so foreign on such a young child.

I flashed him a sympathetic smile, but his eyes drifted back to his now-empty cone.

I started rummaging through my pockets for money and looking down the street for the ice cream parlor. But before I could do anything the boy's sister had taken his cone and scraped half of her ice cream into it. She handed it back to him with a smile and gave him a one-armed hug. The mother looked on with an approving glow and got her children moving again with a few soft words. The boy trotted along after his big sister, beaming with admiration.

As the trio departed, my mind was still processing what I had just witnessed. That simple act of kindness was the most beautiful thing I had seen in a long while. The golden-haired girl in the orange dress had revealed to me what Rembrandt's girl could not. I felt rejuvenated. The emptiness and apathy I had been trying to shake was gone. In its place was a feeling of hope that buoyed me. I finished my macchiato and wandered off into the bustling city center to find some guitar strings, hoping I could share this feeling with someone.



*Brittney Mecham – Pickup*



*Andrea Moglestad – Rainy Day Reflections*

## The Definition of Nurse

*Caitlin Hainley*

Is what? I think while nursing my babe  
white as the snow, plump as a plum (stone)  
fat from my milk, happy from my care.

Is what? I think and picture my husband  
catching our boy born in the night  
fast as a rat, slick as a pickle, red like the dawn,

fat and crying in the stillness of a bathroom.  
We wait for the crunch of gravel, the bark of a dog  
signaling the midwife's arrival.

Is what? I think long into the night  
as a feverish child lies on my chest  
hot as a star, still as the sun

Is what? I think in bleached starched whites  
watching as the woman holds the man's hand  
speckled as a Sussex hen, soft and wrinkled as unmade bed sheets.

her white hair brushes his face: snow falling on the moon,  
her love more valuable than my care.

Is what? I think, is what?

## In The Garden

---

*Caitlin Hainley*

My mother dries lettuce in the washing machine,  
Washes green beans on the gentle cycle.  
Who can say what seed sprouted,  
Growing into this grand plot.  
My father shrugs his shoulders, raises an eyebrow.  
One can never know for sure  
With my mother.

If I listen, I too can hear things:  
The whisperings of plotting rabbits,  
Carrots huddled shivering in fright  
The stillness of the soil,  
The soft sighs of settling potatoes.  
My lover shrugs his shoulders, raises an eyebrow.  
One can never know for sure.

But somewhere between the poetry of parsnips  
And the pitter-patter of runner beans, Between orations of okra  
And the discourse of devil's bones,  
Between the spiel of asparagus  
And the soft shift of earth beneath earth,  
Earthworms shrug their shoulders, raise an eyebrow, burrow on.  
An idea sprouts and grows.

All ideas cultivate in the thick mulch of the brain  
From the remnants of the day sliced away,  
Left to decay  
In moist sub-cranium caverns,  
That rich compost heap of memories.  
From this mix of time and fertile trimmings,  
My mother decides to dry lettuce  
Differently  
And as my mind turns under the steaming heap of life's leftovers  
I sort through the sweet dark matter, dig toward the warm center  
Shrug my shoulders, raise an eyebrow  
And write.



*Nate Gainer – The Hippy*



## Dust

*Sarah Pillman*

There was dust, dust everywhere - coating the windshield, tarnishing the navy blue paint of his new car, seeping in through the cracks in the windows and circulating in the cool air, polluting it with grit, chafing against his skin, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. Gravel roads were a bitch, and one thing Ian had not missed about the South - hell, the abundance of paved roads was one of his favorite parts about Chicago. The metropolis had a lot of issues, he wouldn't deny that - pollution of all kinds, an abundance of homeless, so much crime that each new day without a shooting was miraculous, and all concrete and no nature, to name a few - but he'd take it all over the gravel roads of northern Louisiana, especially because at least in Chicago a guy could get a decent towing service, could just call up his AAA and they'd be there within, what, a half hour?

Then again, he'd never had a flat tire in his seven years in Chicago. It would be the second he went home to Louisiana that something like that would happen. Twenty miles from his parents' farm and there it had been: fate. Sitting in the middle of the road. Waiting to blow out his tire. AAA had informed him, quite politely, that, as he was outside his native area, it would take some time for the local department to help him out.

"No spare, huh?" Mel asked the second Ian stepped out of his car. Mel looked exactly like Ian remembered him - a little too red from sun, a couple of pounds overweight, with a few too many years in an auto shop staining his hands and forearms gray. He'd lumbered up in a beat-up tow truck bearing the logo Mel's Auto Shop, the same truck Ian remembered from childhood, constantly parked

outside of the gas station of his hometown, Sharville, rusting. Apparently Mel's got business, just from idiots from out of town who didn't carry spare tires with them. Ian was one of them now, and Mel didn't recognize him, hardly even looked at him, as he hitched up his worn, dirty jeans and squatted by the Taurus, Ian's pride and joy, to take a look.

"No." Ian felt stupid admitting it. "Bought it used, only a couple thousand miles on it, just checked for it now, and...there it wasn't."

Such an answer - it sounded ridiculous to his own ears, like it was the response of some kind of fancy city boy who'd never gotten his hands dirty in his life - apparently didn't warrant an answer from Mel, who simply grunted in response. His broad hands circled the flat tire, caressing the rubber, ragged nails trailing the grooves, and then, abruptly, with ease surprising for such a big man, stood. "Looks like you caught a nail." He squinted at Ian in the hot sun, looking at him for the first time. "Kinda foolish, not checking for a spare before you bought the car."

As if Ian didn't already know that.

"I can tow you back to the shop and fix it up." For a brief moment, Mel smiled. "Don't feel too bad, kid. Even the greats forget sometimes - I don't have a spare on me either."

And that was how Ian ended up standing in front of Mel's Auto Shop after a ten-minute drive into Sharville, relieved to escape the awkward silence between himself and Mel and the overpowering scent of chewing tobacco of the tow truck's cab, but all too aware that Mel was going to charge him for the tow and that there was nothing he could do about it.

Mel's Auto Shop looked exactly as Ian remembered it: clapboard siding painted white and smooth red script spelling out the name just above the garage doors. Attached at the side sat a little gas

station that Ian had frequented regularly as a kid, the small bike rack still in place where he'd settle his bike after the long ride into town. A beat-up bulletin board situated next to the entrance, covered in ads, some so old they were yellow, others faded by the sun. It was exactly as Ian remembered it. Nothing had changed.

He hated it.

"Might as well go inside, kid." Mel's voice made him jump. "It's too hot to stand around out here. Go get a Coke or something. I'll let you know when I'm done."

A Coke, yeah. More profit in Mel's pockets. But it was hot out, the kind of heat that surrounded a person, consumed them, seeped into their brain and shut down all thought production. Did they have this kind of heat in Chicago? For a moment, Ian couldn't remember. Surely they did, but there was always some pleasant air-conditioned place to escape to. Here, in Nowhere, Louisiana, there was simply that: nowhere to go.

**Her question struck him as funny, although not exactly in the comical sense. He was from around there, just hadn't considered himself a resident for seven years.**

So Ian escaped into the cool sanctuary of Mel's gas station just as his shirt began to soak through with sweat. The layout was exactly as he remembered it: candy, chips, and simple foodstuffs to the left, home improvement items to the right - light bulbs, batteries, simple things that people might need in a jiffy and were willing to pay an overpriced amount for so they wouldn't have to drive into a big town to get it. Coolers packed with soda and cheap beer were in the back. The counter sat in the middle, next to a couple of booths

where, in Ian's childhood, a group of old men had gathered on Saturday mornings to drink coffee. They were dead now for all he knew.

The girl behind the counter smiled at him, brushing her hair away from her face. It was long and red and fell down her back like a sheet, and the color accented the slight sunburn on her bare, freckled shoulders and nose. "Welcome to Mel's. You the guy with car trouble?"

At least she didn't know about his stupidity with the spare tire. "Yeah." However, her tone was far too conversational for his liking, and he didn't say anything else as he headed towards one of the booths. He selected a seat that faced away from her, in case she hadn't gotten the message from his abrupt tone that he was in no mood to talk.

She hadn't. "It's an awful hot day to get a flat!" she exclaimed, and still, her tone was irritatingly conversational, even as Ian pulled out his cell phone. It was as if she knew that he had no one to call to come pick him up from Mel's - old friends were long gone, at least the ones he'd cared to keep in touch with, and his parents forty miles away at a doctor's appointment - and his mom had told him they'd be there all day. He was stuck exactly where he was, at the mercy of Mel. "You're not from around here, huh?"

Her question struck him as funny, although not exactly in the comical sense. He was from around there, just hadn't considered himself a resident for seven years. Despite his misgivings and his reluctance to encourage her social efforts, he asked, "What makes you say that?"

She was beside the table suddenly, her movements so silent that Ian hadn't even heard her come out from behind the counter. She rested a hand on the tabletop. Her nails were painted a pale shade of pink. Up close, he realized she was young, maybe not even over twenty-one to his twenty-five. "I don't know you, and I know everyone around here. Sharville isn't a big place. Where are you from?"

And he sounded different than her, he realized. Her voice had a twang in his ear that his must have once had, but now, he'd dropped it. When had that happened? He didn't even know. "Chicago."

Something pushed in him to continue, before he'd even paused to think about it. "But I'm from here originally. I'm here to see my parents."

"Oh, yeah?" She looked intrigued, truly interested, not just politely so. "Who're they? I bet I know 'em."

He hesitated for the first time. "I'm a Barnes."

And of course her face lit up with knowledge, because there wasn't a person around Sharville who didn't know his folks. They were real big shit - his dad, anyway, with his cattle business that raked in more money than he knew what to do with. In a town with a population just shy of a one thousand, that kind of man got notoriety, something his dad had always reveled in. "Sure, I know 'em! Your dad comes in here all the time." She laughed, a sound he was surprised to find pleasant. "Always buys the same thing: a diet Pepsi and a pack of Camels."

Ian stared. He hadn't even known his dad smoked.

"Yeah, real nice guy." Her smile - it seemed perpetual - faltered slightly. "We were all real sorry to hear about him being sick. Around town, I mean. Yeah. He...he's a good man."

It seemed a lame conclusion, the repetition, the kind of awkward bungling that always happened in social situations. She obviously didn't know what to say, and for the first time looked uncomfortable about approaching him. Ian had expected such a reaction upon coming home. He expected the awkward pauses, the silences, the swift pats on the back of sympathy when words failed people, which happened all too often. Apparently people had a hard time vocalizing, "Sorry your old man has cancer in the ass and will probably die within the next six months." That kind of reaction would have been accepted, appreciated, even, but he doubted he was going to get it from anyone.

"Thank you," he replied, because what else could he say? She didn't know his dad, only sold cigarettes to him on what was apparently a regular basis, and a habit he'd apparently hid from Ian for as long as he'd been doing it, never mentioning a word about it over their irregularly-timed phone calls, had never heard once from his mom either. His father's only vice ever had been hubris. The thought of him with another was almost dizzying.

"Your mom's a real sweet lady, too." The girl had perked back up, recovering from the moment of awkwardness. "She mostly comes in to buy milk or ice. Sometimes she'll grab a bag of dog food for that puppy of hers, but only when she forgets it at the store. What's the dog's name? She always waits for your mom so patiently in the car."

The last time Ian had been home, seven years ago (had it really been that long?), they'd had a big old golden retriever, Lady, who had peaked at life at maybe four-years-old and spent the rest of her days with crippling arthritis. When he'd moved to Chicago, fresh out of high school, she was the one thing he'd missed about home. And when his mom had finally put her down, two years later, when Ian was twenty, she hadn't told him right away; rather, she told him three months later, over the phone, a casual afterthought to a conversation that was almost too painful to bear. "She got real bad, Ian," his mom had explained, justified, when he'd told her how angry, how unbearably sick the fact that she hadn't told him made him. "Couldn't even walk up the stairs anymore. Your dad wouldn't have it." It was a common trend of his mom's: when in doubt, blame Dad. Is that where he'd gotten it? From his mom? "Lady went real peaceful." As if that made it better. As if that somehow rationalized the fact that his dog was dead and no one had told him.

And then, with painful pensiveness that had hit him like a kick in the gut, his mom had added thoughtfully, "I don't think I want another dog. They're too much work."

That was how he'd always felt. Like too much work.

It must not have shown on his face, his discomfort, his unease, because the girl asked, as if the conversation were right on track and not at all one-sided, "You're teaching in Chicago, right? Your mom came in here the other day, said you were coming home for the summer."

"Yeah. I teach history." He didn't add that his job at an overcrowded high school in Chicago was nothing like he'd imagined. His fantasies of teaching had always been in a quaint classroom, surrounded by intelligent kids who wanted to learn, who enjoyed his lectures, who responded to his questions and wrote thought-provoking papers. The reality was less pretty, crammed in a room full of smelly, disrespectful teenagers who could have cared less about what he was saying, what he was trying to teach them, that what had happened in the past that was integral in understanding the future. For someone who could explain Caesar's military tactics down to the finest detail, knew each and every cause of the Bubonic Plague (and there were more than one thought), could not only name all the French kings in succession, but also their queens and mistresses, for all intents and purposes lived and breathed history, it was severely disappointing.

Not that he'd ever tell his parents that. Disappointed was exactly how they'd felt, particularly his old man, when he'd announced he wouldn't spend his life following in his father's footsteps tending cattle, but would be going to school to study history, or "read about things that no longer mattered," as his dad said.

"That's right." The girl moved a piece of hair away from her face, out of her eyes. "Your mom's really proud of you."

**Comprehension**  
**dawned over Mel's**  
**weather-beaten**  
**face, and he**  
**nodded slowly.**  
**"Sure, sure. Steve**  
**Barnes' boy. We**  
**haven't seen you**  
**around here**  
**in a while.**

"Proud?" The echo came out sharper, more disdainful than he'd intended, because - of all things - that was one word he'd never account to his mother's feelings for him.

She looked confused, probably rightly so. After all, he was college-educated, had a steady job, and wasn't dealing drugs out of a pizza place while still working on his bachelor's degree like Marty Foster, his best friend from high school. Most parents would be proud of that. Wouldn't they? Ian didn't know. He'd never had another set of parents, even when he'd wanted one. "Sure. She was in here yesterday, bought a case of Bud Light. I'd never seen her do that before, so I asked her about it. She said you were coming home, and she told me all of it - how you lived in Chicago, taught at a school, all that."

"And she was proud?" God, he hated the skepticism in his voice, almost as much as he hated the fact that he actually had to ask it, couldn't stop himself from doing so. Never once had his mom told him she was proud of anything he'd ever done. Maybe it was something she'd picked up from his dad, because he never would have said it either, never would have even considered it. Moreover, things were simply never good enough. No matter what he did, he could always do better. They weren't the kind of parents who sat around at football games with other parents, gloating about their kid's achievements. They were the kind who would listen to other people talk about their kids, and then come home to unbraided Ian for the things he could have done, but didn't. "Marty Foster is going to LSU for agricultural engineering," his dad had replied when Ian had come to him, at eighteen and practically bursting with pride, when he'd gotten an acceptance letter to Chicago State University. "Why couldn't you do that?"

It didn't matter now. They all knew how Marty Foster had turned out, or at least Ian did.



"Yeah, of course she was." The girl looked a little uncomfortable, more so than when she'd spoken of his dad, and took a little step back, hardly more than a slight shift of the weight, but still noticeable. Was it his insecurity that unnerved her like that?

Funny, how this girl could discern things in his parents that he hadn't ever seen. From a few encounters in a gas station she'd pulled from them things that he never had in twenty-five years of life. If familiarity was what proved a relationship, she was more a daughter to them than he was a son, knew them more intimately than he did himself. She saw them as people, whereas he saw them as parents. Their flaws didn't bother her and hers didn't bother them, a luxury he'd never had. What would it be like? To be able to see them simply as people? Would he like them more? Less? Off their pedestal of parenthood, what were they really like?

The door swung open and Mel walked in, bringing with him a gust of the hot, humid air of outdoors. "You're all set, kid," he said to Ian, stepping across the shiny tile in dingy work boots to hand the girl a receipt. She plucked it from his stained, dirty fingers. "Ring him up, will you, Jen?"

"Sure thing." Jen walked back to behind the counter, her movements as silent as when she'd stepped out. "This is Ian Barnes, did you know that, Mel?"

Comprehension dawned over Mel's weather-beaten face, and he nodded slowly. "Sure, sure. Steve Barnes' boy. We haven't seen you around here in a while." He scratched the back of his neck, and Ian suddenly knew what was coming: the awkward words of comfort and consolation over his dad's condition. "Sorry to hear about your dad, kid. How's he doing?"

Ian almost wanted to direct the question to Jen, since she seemed to know so much more about his parents than he did.

“Good. He’s a fighter.” That was what people wanted to hear, liked to hear, and he knew it.

Mel nodded, appeased. “Give him my best. Jen’ll ring you up.” With a final nod, he was back out the door, headed back to his shop, where it was no doubt he felt the more comfortable than in the store.

Paying Jen took nothing more than a simple swipe of his Mastercard and a scribbled signature on a piece of paper and he was free, free to go home, to a place he hadn’t considered home in years. Before it had seemed like a gloomy prospect, driving along that gravel road, but it now seemed like a glorious escape from the florescent lights of Mel’s shop.

Jen smiled across the counter at him as he pushed his billfold back into his pocket. “Have a good day now.”

“I will.” And maybe he would.



*Andrea Moglestad – Moonlit Venice*

## Glisten

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*Lindsay Simpson*

What if apparently uninteresting words such as "glisten,"  
"compost," or "hutch" started fires in me?

What if I led you in an engaging exchange,  
in hopes that these sounds would emerge?

Maybe the thrill would be synonymous with how you  
bounced the syllables from tongue to lips,  
bubbles popping into air.

What if "like" increased the heat?

"Glisten like birds."

What if there's really a mystic felicity  
in interchanging things like  
"rose" and "thorn"?

## Fall's Twin Sister

*Lindsay Simpson*

That morning, ostracized from October,  
after the long night that must have stretched  
for hours, a highway through a two-barn town,  
Blacksburg, actually, you were born  
to a tall woman with fine hair  
and a long face who saw nothing but you.  
Your nurse, Ann, cast her mouth up  
and her eyes down, four corners that  
touched like the tip of a seesaw to  
those rough wooden chips of the  
playground, the park with the steep slopes  
of too-short grass, in that town they call  
“a special place,” but you’ve only seen  
strip malls and abandoned schools. That  
morning, the skin that had never touched earth,  
your arms, crooked like a bent paper clip,  
calmed for just a moment. Ann lifted you,  
supported from the bottom. Your mother  
imagined you in April, the park’s grass longer.  
She wished she could laminate the way  
the air changed, how it felt to have  
her arms newly full with what others  
think the first day of spring smells like.



Nate Gainer – Touch the Sky

## Life Without Andy

*Savannah Wood*

1965

Mamma and I had just finished getting supper ready: meatloaf, green beans, mashed potatoes, and homemade bread cut in thick slices. A pie made with the first early apples was cooling on the windowsill. The table was set, and everyone was inside and ready for supper, except for Andy. Andy was still out on the tractor. The red clock on the kitchen wall above the stove said 5:55. We ate supper at six, and Andy hated to miss supper. Six o' five rolled around, and Susie, Davey, and Jackie started complaining. Momma reprimanded them, "Andy does so much for you all, and the least you can do is wait ten minutes for him to finish up mowing."

Six-thirty came around, the food was cold and the ice in the water glasses had melted. I didn't really feel like eating anymore. Momma pursed her lips and glanced at the clock. Daddy anxiously fumbled with the newspaper, reading it, then putting it down, then trying to fold it up perfectly. His heavy boots tapped out a nervous beat on the floorboards. My older brother Andy should have been done by now. I walked over to the open window and stood there, listening. I didn't hear the tractor.

**I'd never seen  
them looking so  
scared before,  
and it made me  
more scared than  
I already was.**

At 6:32, Daddy told me in a matter-of-fact way, "Kathleen, go out to the hill and see what Andy's doing. He's probably broke down and got himself into a mess trying to fix it out there."

Something had to be wrong, Daddy never ever called me Kathleen. The sun was setting right behind the big hill, and I was blinded by it as I climbed, listening and looking for Andy the entire time. My heart was racing by the time that I got to the top of the hill, then I looked down, and my heart beat out of my chest. My knees buckled beneath me and arms and legs trembled. The tractor was on its side, tires in the air, and Andy was nowhere to be seen. Somehow, my trembling legs got me to the bottom of the hill.

He was still breathing when I found him, just barely though. His eyes were open wide and glassy looking, and blood was coming out of his mouth. His fingers were cold and bluish. The tractor had crushed him, and I couldn't get it off. God knows I tried. It seems stupid now to think that I could flip a tractor over, but I didn't think of that then. They must have heard my screaming, because Momma and Daddy came running over the hill pretty soon. I'd never seen them looking so scared before, and it made me more scared than I already was.

"Go call the ambulance," Daddy shouted, so I ran back over the hill, as fast as my trembling legs could run. The house had never seemed so far away.

When I got to the house, Susie was curled up in a ball and crying under the sink, and Dave and Jackie kept hounding me, "Is Andy ok?" and "Why are you crying, is he dead?"

I clenched my fist and yelled at them, "LET ME USE THE PHONE." Then they started crying too, and I ran to use the living room phone. My fingers fumbled and slipped, and I could barely dial the number. The conversation I don't remember, but I do remember, all too well, the neighbors and paramedics lifting the tractor off him. His body was crushed right into the ground and his jeans and shirt were soaked with blood. He was still breathing though, so they took him in the ambulance. The ambulance left, Momma and Daddy got in the car and followed. We kids stayed, and the neighbors stayed too.



The sun had set by now, and I locked myself in the cave, where we stored our canned goods and produce. They tried to get me to come inside, but I wouldn't. I didn't know what to do, or where to go, or what to think, or how to feel. The comforting smells of the earthen floor and early fall apples soothed me. Back when we were really little, Andy and I would play store down here. Without Momma knowing, he'd sneak the paper money out of the Monopoly box for us to use. We'd set up all the cans and fruits and vegetables like it was a store and flipped an old wooden crate over to make a counter. Andy always got to be a store owner, since he was older, but every once in a while he'd be the shopper I could be behind the counter for a bit.

I spent that night lying on the soft dirt floor, crying and praying, "Oh God, don't let Andy die. Please God, don't let him die." Mrs. Jones told me the next morning that he had died on the way to the hospital. She tried to talk to me, and she tried to give me a hug, but I ran outside to the orchard.

I cried, and I yelled, and I felt sicker than I had ever felt, even sicker than the night before. I would cry, throw up, and cry some more. Then I went back to the cave again and just sat there in the cool, dirty darkness, void of feeling or thought. Mrs. Jones came at dinner time and sweetly asked me to come inside for supper. "NO, I'm not hungry. I'll NEVER be hungry again," was my response, and I believed it.

A while later I awoke to the crunch of gravel. Momma and Daddy must be back. They probably had Andy with them too. It was probably all just a miscommunication. Our Andy couldn't have died, it was probably some other Andy. Our Andy was still breathing, and he had been lying there for a long time, so that probably meant that he could make it. God couldn't have let our

Andy die, He just couldn't have. Daddy couldn't get along without him. He helped him so much with the farm, and Julia and Andy were planning on getting married next year. God couldn't do that

to Julia. We all just loved him so much, and he loved us so much. No, God couldn't - He wouldn't - do that to us. I ran out of the cave and into the house, ready to see Andy again, or at least hear good news about him.

As I got closer to the house, I saw lots of cars in the driveway. Grandma and Grandpa's car was there, and so was Uncle Jim and Aunt Carol's, and Aunt Edith's, and Uncle Ross and Aunt Jane's, and Julia's family was here too. Gee, everyone was here. That had to be a good sign, didn't it? I expected to go inside and see Andy there in a body cast, a little sore, awfully bruised, but there, and alive. His reassuring smile and calm deep voice would let us know everything was going to be alright. He'd laugh about how he did something stupid to make tractor flip over, and he'd over-exaggerate everything and make it into a great story that the little kids would want to hear over and over.

I opened up the door and walked into the kitchen. It was dark and empty. Sound and light came from the living room; the lamplight bathed it in a yellow glow and made everyone's face distinguishable. Standing there in the doorway, covered in dirt like a coal miner from my night in the cave, I looked at every single face, looking for Andy's, but it wasn't there. Everyone was there, except for Andy.

Cold, windowless, and filled with over-stuffed furniture, the funeral home was just as welcoming on the inside as its stern brick exterior suggested. All of our relatives piled in, family by family, and filled the building to the brim with people. I knew everyone in that crowded room, but I felt very isolated. All night, I went through the socially acceptable motions of a funeral visitation, but I wasn't there at all. The only part of the night that I recall is the way my heart pounded and my hands trembled as I made that inevitable walk across that stuffy room to see that shiny pine casket.

I hated looking in caskets, and I still do. There's just something terrifying about that first glance into a casket. It doesn't matter whether it's your brother or your neighbor's great aunt, it's still

terrifying. They're dead, and I don't expect anything else, but that moment where you see it and know for sure that they're dead is something that I dread. For a fraction of a second my heart feels like it's going to beat right out of my chest, then after that I'm alright. It's just that first glance that I dread.

I didn't have to look in Andy's casket though. The accident was too bad for him to have an open casket. I'm kind of glad I didn't have to see him. I don't know, it made things easier, I guess. "He looked good," that's what everyone always says after they go to a funeral. I guess there's nothing else much that you can say to break the awkward silence on the way home. It's kind of a stupid thing to say, though. Nobody ever looks good at their funeral. They look dead.

The church was filled with people, way more people than I've ever seen there on a Sunday morning. They even had to seat them in the Sunday school rooms. Pastor Everett did the service, and Julia's older sister Nancy played the organ, but I don't remember much because I couldn't hear anything over all the people crying. Julia cried the most of anyone. People said it was "a real nice service." I don't think it was a real nice service. What's "real nice" about a service where half the town bawls their eyes out? After my funeral, I want people to say it was a terrible service.

People are always calling and stopping by to ask Momma and Daddy how they are and to drop off a frozen tuna casserole. They always tell them that they're doing better and thank them for the casserole, and whoever came to visit says, "You're welcome, I'll bring another one over next week. If you need anything, just call." I don't understand why it is that death makes people lie all the time.

Momma and Daddy aren't doing better. They act alright during the day, but after they think we're all asleep, Daddy goes out to the barn and smokes. I bet he cries too. Momma sits out on the front porch in the rocking chair, just sitting there, rocking and staring out into the night until it's practically morning. Sometimes she cries too. I can hear it from my bedroom window.

When she cries, I can't sleep, either. I just lie there listening to her, and sometimes I cry, too. Momma and Daddy never used to sit outside, and never stayed up so late either. They aren't doing better at all.

As for the neighbors, I hate their casseroles and their visits with a passion. I haven't had anything to eat but casseroles for weeks, and you can't get any peace and quiet around this house. Someone is always here, trying to make things better and ending up making things worse. They always say, "call if you need anything," but I bet that half of them wouldn't know what to do if we did call them and need anything. They don't really care. We never even talked to half of them before Andy died. The only reason why they come is so that other people don't talk about them and so they can have something to say to their neighbors about us when they gossip in line at the post office. Momma and Daddy aren't the only ones lying. Everyone's lying; apparently that's what you're supposed to do when someone dies.

Sometimes I think about calling them and saying, "Mrs. Jones, this is Katie. You always say to call if we need anything, well we do need something. We need you to stop coming over and bringing your soggy, greasy tuna casseroles." I want to call them, but I never do. I just greet them at the door like I'm happy to see them and take the tuna casserole Momma passes off to me and put it in the freezer with all the other tuna casseroles. Wouldn't it be a shame if our freezer broke and we lost all the tuna casseroles? Sometimes I think about unplugging it so that I don't have to choke one down every single night. Instead I just thank Mrs. Jones and get last week's casserole out of the freezer to thaw out for supper tonight. I guess that I'm lying too.

1966

Andy died a year ago, but I still remember it. Some days it seems like it's been years since he died, and other days it seems like it's only been hours. Everything is just so different now than it was.

Andy not being here is the biggest change, but so many other things are different too. It's like the whole world is completely different.

After the accident, Daddy sold most of the farm. He sold most of the land, the animals, and the tractors and got a job working in town at the meat packing plant. He didn't even harvest the crops before he sold it. It was all auctioned off with the crops ready to harvest. Momma was livid when she found out he was selling it before harvest.

They fought a little bit, and then Daddy broke down right in front of us all. "I just can't do this anymore without Andy," he sobbed. "I just can't stand it. I got a job yesterday at the meat packing plant. I'll make more money there than we ever did farming. I went to the bank last week, and Andy had a loan he didn't tell us about, a big loan, and now we're in charge of paying it off. He got it from a big bank in the city because he didn't want us to find out about it...if he would have got it in town I know that they would forgive it, but they won't budge there...he bought a house."

We went to Andy's house later that week, after Daddy got home from work. It was a little farm house just outside of town that had been empty for a while. It didn't look too good on the outside, and we went inside and it didn't look too good there either, but there were paint cans, shingles, new windows, tools, and all sorts of things Andy had bought to fix it up. It looked like he was planning to fix it up that winter and have it ready by the time they got married. Now we don't know what's going to happen to it. Momma and Daddy aren't sure what the right thing to do with it is.

Our country schools had to consolidate this year, so now we ride the bus and go to the big school in town. I don't like it. School started the week that Andy died, so we missed out on the first two weeks.

You'd think that we missed out on several years though from the way people act. The town kids don't like the country kids, and the country kids don't really want anything to do with me either. I guess they're

scared of me, like my brother died of a contagious disease. They'll talk to me sometimes, if there's no way to get out of it, but they avoid the subject of family, brothers especially. They'll do anything to avoid the possibility of having to talk about Andy or his death.

Jill and Sarah were my best friends at school last year, and they'll sit with me on the bus, but they have new friends at school, country kids from the other country school. Apparently if you miss the first two weeks at school, you miss out on the chance of making friends. I don't tell Momma and Daddy how much I hate school though; they have enough to worry about.

The one thing we didn't sell was the tractor. It was Andy's tractor. He had bought it with his own money after graduation. The day after it flipped over on Andy the neighbors got it right side up, cleaned it up, then put it in the barn. Nobody's used it since then. Sometimes the little kids will climb on it and pretend to drive it, but other than that, it just sits there, getting dusty. We sold the bull and most of the cows along with the land, but we still keep chickens, and enough pigs and cattle for our family to eat. I do most of the chores. Every once in a while, out of the corner of my eye, when the sun is shining just right, I think that I see Andy sitting on the tractor.

I always used to help Andy with chores, I'd gather eggs and he'd feed the cows. We'd talk back and forth as we worked. Sometimes I'd say, "Hey, Andy, guess what happened today?" and then remember that he isn't there. It used to happen all the time, but now it happens less and less.

If Andy was still alive, he'd be in the barn doing chores when I got off the bus. He'd ask me how school was, and I'd tell him everything. He'd know what I should do; he always knew what to do. Then he'd tease me and race me to the house for supper.

I miss the way he'd pick me up and spin me around when he'd give me a hug. I miss the way we'd joke around and have fun when we did chores. I miss how he'd carry the heavy hay bales for me. I miss the candy he'd bring home for us when he went into town. I miss having someone to talk to when things went wrong. I just miss him.

Andy still has his own bedroom. I always hated how he got his own bedroom and I had to share with Susie. Sometimes it was enough to make me loathe him. Now I'm glad that it's still his. Nobody's touched it since the day he died. His bed still has the same sheets on it, his town clothes are still hanging on the back of a chair from when he went to go meet Julia's aunt and uncle from Chicago who were visiting for the week. His mail still sits on his bedside table, unopened, and his shoes still have mud on them. All of his clothes still hang in the closet. By looking at it, you'd never be able to tell that it was a room that belonged to a dead person. It looks like he could walk in at any minute. It looks like he was there this morning.

Andy's room isn't dusty like his tractor. Momma still cleans it every week. When she cleans it, she works really slowly, and touches everything so delicately, as though the whole room, and all the memories it holds, could all fall to pieces if she sweeps too fast. I heard them talking downstairs one night about giving his room to me. They said it was the right thing to do and that it was selfish to leave a room empty when they have four kids, and to leave all his things to rot when someone else could use them. "It's what Andy would have wanted," they said. That was six months ago, and his room is still filled with his stuff. To be honest, I'm really glad they've left it.

Susie still thinks about Andy too. A few weeks ago when we were lying in bed she said she forgot what his voice sounded like. Then I thought about it, and no matter how hard I tried I just couldn't hear his voice anymore. I can still see his face though. Will that go away, too?

The next morning at breakfast she asked Daddy if he remembered his voice. I wish she wouldn't have asked that; I told her not to. His face changed completely, he put down his coffee and took

a long time to wipe his face with his napkin, then he sweetly but painfully said, "Yes, Susie, I remember his voice, not as well as I used to, though." Then he quickly left for work.

I never talk about Andy, especially not in front of Momma and Daddy. I don't know how to, and I don't want to, at all. Other people do, and it just makes them upset. I hate it more than anything when they're upset. I just can't stand it. It's easy enough to be alright when they're alright, but how am I supposed to know how to be alright when my parents don't even know?

Jackie and Davey aren't ever upset. They were too little to understand. Jackie doesn't even know who he is. She was barely two when he died. Sometimes I'm jealous of her. She isn't haunted at night by scenes she can't get out of her head, she doesn't have to experience that night over and over. Jackie doesn't have feelings she doesn't understand, can't explain, and can't talk about. Jackie doesn't live in a world that acts like everything is normal when it's everything but normal for her. For Jackie, the world is still nice, parents know everything, and God doesn't let bad things happen.

December 14th would have been Andy's twentieth birthday. For my entire life, we had always had steak, macaroni and cheese, and chocolate cake on the 14th, Andy's favorite foods. We ate it in the dining room at six o'clock. Always. This year, we didn't. No cake, no steak, no macaroni and cheese. We ate at the kitchen table. We ate at seven o'clock too. Daddy doesn't get off work at the meat packing plant until six, so we eat at seven now. So here we were on the 14th of December, the six of us eating tuna casserole at seven. I hate tuna casserole anyway, but that night I really loathed it.

May 8th was supposed to be Julia and Andy's wedding day. It would have been the perfect day for a wedding. It was a warm, bright, and sunny, with a gentle, cool breeze. There were more wildflowers that spring than I've ever seen before in my life. They grew absolutely



everywhere. Julia had wanted to use wildflowers for the bouquets and table decorations. There wasn't a wedding though, because Andy is dead and dead people can't get married. Momma cried and Daddy cried, Susie and I even cried. Julia and her family came over that afternoon and cried too. Dave looked at us all like we were crazy and Jackie only cried because everyone else did too. I wonder if Julia will ever get married, and if she does, will she invite us to her wedding?

### 1970

Julia's wedding was today, her wedding to Scott. That day five years ago that we all cried in the living room, I couldn't fathom Julia marrying anyone but Andy, and I thought I would be terribly mad if she did. Now, everything's different though, it feels right for her to marry Scott, and it feels strange that it feels right. Andy would have really liked Scott, and we all know that he would be happy for her. We were happy, we were all happy again.

Andy's room is now Susie's room. Our cousin Tom bought Andy's house and land off of us and he's farming there now. Momma and Daddy haven't cried at night for a long time. Three years ago we decided that we'd make a quilt out of his clothes, and the quilt now hangs on the wall in our hallway. Every time I walk by it, I think of him. Thinking about him isn't so hard anymore; talking about him isn't so hard anymore. My memories are lighter and freer.

Yes, the sadness and painful haunting memories are still there, but they're not as strong as they were five years ago.

People die. Things change. We grieve. We question. We doubt. Wounds heal. Pain eases. Hope is restored. Faith grows stronger. We grow up. We grow stronger. We learn from our mistakes. We make peace. Life goes on.

But still, I miss him.



*Nate Gainer - Snow*

## Until That Day

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*Mary Rowan*

Until that day I had so much imagination.  
I loved to play cowboys and Indians.

I was a cop or a robber.  
I went into stealth mode.

I was on the lookout for danger.  
Behind every tree, rock, hillside, there was danger.

I was hiding behind the trees and crouching next to the  
huge rocks on ram's farm  
and laying into the hillsides waiting for danger to come  
over the ridge.

I was hiding in the barn, chicken coop and spring house  
waiting for my ray.  
I loved to walk through the woods and look for sticks.

The big sticks were rifles.  
The little sticks were Colt .45s.

Every year for my birthday I got a gun set, six shooters  
around my waist  
and my sheriffs badge pinned to my shirt.

Then one day I was just being a kid, and I guess to mom  
I was being bad.  
I ran from the house and I was standing in the yard.

The door swings open.  
She is wearing black polyester slacks with a hateful angry red shirt.

I hitch up my hand-me-down jeans.  
I cross my arms seeking comfort within my gray sweatshirt.

The distance from us is from where I'm standing now  
to the back of this room.  
The mustiness from the morning rain is suspended around me.

A .22 rifle is resting comfortably in her hands,  
The same hands that caressed and cradled her rosary this morning.

As the silver plain cross dangles from her neck  
She slowly raises it until she has the bead between my eyes.

She dares me to defy her. I am the Taurian woman of strength.  
I wrap my arms around the courage that I have within me.

I do not succumb. She glares at me. My eyes plead back.  
I open my arms wide.  
My mind empties with the hollow click of the rifle.

Since that day I have not been afraid to die.  
I am left standing like the granite Sunset Cliffs surviving the continuous oceanic erosion of abuse.



*Brittney Mecham – Evanesce*

## Roar of a Rabid Anteater

*Jennifer Stanton*

**R**egina marched into the living room naked. She moved with a sense of purpose. That would show him.

Their last words reverberated through her mind.

"...you aren't really paying attention to me," she heard herself say.

"I'm sorry. What was I thinking? There's nothing going on in my life. Sure, I have my mother moving in with me, I'm helping her with Jimmy and...hmmm...What's that other thing? Oh yeah. My wife died."

"You didn't." Two words that ended everything.

Regina shook her head and sighed.

This was not how things were supposed to go for them. They had been building what had seemed like a strong, healthy relationship. So she had thought. But more and more often he had slipped and called her by his dead wife's name. Or told her how Sarah had been some amazing combination of Madam Curie, Mother Theresa, and a domestic goddess with the beauty of Helen of Troy. Sarah the Graceful and Good. Sarah of the Great Beauty and Loving Disposition.

**... she had been  
overcome by  
the thought that  
this might be the  
last time there  
would be love  
between them.**

Sarah the Bane of My Existence and Eternal Pain in my Ass.

Gina felt guilty for even thinking it, but it was truthfully how she felt. For all that Sarah was dead, it was Regina who felt like the ghost. Haunting Sarah's house, sad, solitary, and silent, save for when she let her pain and anger get the best of her. How could she ever compete with the memory of perfection that Tommy kept within himself?

She dragged her bright purple toenails through the deep pile of the immaculate white carpeting, making random patterns.

Guilt stabbed at her again. Passive aggression was an ugly thing. Keeping the house up above and beyond even the fastidious standards of Martha Stewart had helped Tommy cope with Sarah's death, his mother's swiftly deteriorating health, and his brother Jimmy's near-constant delinquency. It was the only thing in his life he really had any control over.

Gina had helped Tommy clean the house after the party the night before. He'd run the vacuum cleaner while she picked up the odd paper plate and occasional beer and pop bottles left lying around. Tommy had finished with the rug and had headed to the kitchen to wipe down counters again, leaving Gina to put the vacuum away. He left it there waiting and had just walked away.

Watching him leave the room she had been overcome by the thought that this might be the last time there would be love between them. She tried to shake those thoughts and feelings, but they had clung tight and moved into her heart and the pit of her stomach.

"Hey, hun, could you give me a hand?"

She had rolled the vacuum cleaner into the nearest corner so neither of them would trip over it and hurried to help him.

Regina smiled when she saw him. It was an automatic response: it bubbled up inside her and she was powerless to stop it.

Tonight she embraced it. She let herself bathe in all the love and concern she felt for him and the joy she brought to her life.

Tommy kissed her on the cheek on his way to the sink. He deftly rinsed the dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher.

“I love you, Tommy.”

He had turned and looked at her as if seeing her for the first time in years. His eyebrows drew together. A few years or seconds later he smiled.

“I love you, too, Sarah.”

It wasn't the first time he had made the slip. It was simply the most painful.

They had snuggled on the couch. The snuggling had quickly become more serious; clothing was loosened or lost completely. Tommy's shirt disappeared. Gina's was unbuttoned before they made it to the bedroom.

As they made love, she tried to cherish each caress, each kiss, each endearment. Things would end, but she would hold this all within her. He warmed her heart and soul, eased her whirling mind, dark with bad memories that filled a void she couldn't recognize.

She had clung to him afterwards; her head on his chest, her right leg tangled between both of his; his right arm wrapped around her shoulders.

It was over. He wasn't ready for life – relationships - without Sarah. Not yet. Maybe not ever. He wasn't healthy enough or strong enough for it yet. He had too many other things going on to work



on that. She had sighed and then everything had come out and everything had gone terribly wrong. Gina had stomped out in anger and hurt. Her exit made a definite statement, but not the one she would have wanted to make.

She tried to run her finger through her bright purple hair, but was stopped by the spikes. Sometimes she wished she had a more conventional hairstyle. Gina smiled. Tommy loved her hair no matter how she wore it or what color she dyed it. It had never been an issue for him. She had never had to curtail her coloring for him. Tommy seemed to understand that coloring her hair was as important to her as vacuuming his rug was to him. It was an unspoken truth between them.

Gina's eyes fastened on the vacuum cleaner sitting in the corner in judgment over her. She plugged it in and proceeded to remove the shapes she had painstakingly created with her toes. One by one they disappeared. Each transgression removed as the pile moved back into its customary position.

She moved the machine - roaring like the rabid anteater it was - in the familiar pattern Tommy used when he vacuumed. North and South. East and West. Over and over. It was like meditation, to lose yourself in the moment, in the simplicity of using a vacuum cleaner. She wondered if this was how Tommy felt. Over and over, she guided it on its path.

Gina finished, turned the mechanical beast off, and wound up the cord.

"You vacuumed." It was simple, quiet, surprised...confused.

"I messed it up. We should fix the things we mess up."  
Gina looked down at her toenails.

"We should." His feet moved toward her. "I didn't know. That I called you Sarah. I really didn't. We were together for so long that..."

"It's okay. You're going to slip. I know how hard it can be."

"I don't see how you could."

Regina slowly raised her head. He had brought the top sheet with him. He held it out to her.

"You aren't the only man who's ever loved me."

"I'm not an idiot."

She pulled the sheet out of his hand and wound it partially around her, covering enough skin to feel comfortable sitting on the couch. She motioned him to join her. Gina caught his eyes with her own.

"After I graduated I moved around a lot - some college, different jobs, traveled. Eventually, I found myself in England working as a nanny, of all things." She favored him with a glower. "Not one Mary Poppins joke, Tommy. Not one."

He gravely crossed his heart. "No jokes here."

Gina looked down at her hands toying with the edge of the sage green sheet. She hadn't told him much about her past. The nearly twenty-year gap between their high school graduation and their second date was a time she had left shrouded in mist. She never willingly volunteered information about those years, holding them close to keep the memories at bay.

Tommy waited, not pushing. He was good at that.

When she finally spoke again her voice cracked, sounding for all the world like a scratched record.

"When I'd been working in Liverpool for only a few weeks and I was in a book store on one of my afternoons off - just ghosting through the stacks - and I ran right over this guy." A tiny smile

pulled at the corners of her lips. “He was crouched down looking at books on a bottom shelf, and I didn’t even notice him because I was up on my toes looking at the books on the higher shelves.

Then wham! I tripped right over him and we both went down. That’s how I met Peter.”

Gina could see him in her head: curly black hair, deep brown eyes, and a grin that lit up his entire face. He’d been so tall – six-foot three - and handsome. Peter had been amazing.

At first she couldn’t think of anything to say, she’d been so embarrassed. Peter thought she might not speak English, so had tried French, Portuguese, and then German in an effort to communicate with her. Finally, she had pulled her head together and apologized profusely for not paying attention to where she was going, for knocking him over...and possibly for being American.

Peter had been amused and had asked her to have coffee with him. Gina had begged off - she wasn’t sure that coffee with a man she didn’t know in an unfamiliar city, in a brand new country, was the wisest of plans. At the same time she didn’t want him to go away. There was something about him that pulled at her, something behind the humor and the handsome face. In the end she had called her employers and asked their advice. Anna had told her to invite him to supper with the family. She didn’t think it would be too forward and they could all, perhaps, get the measure of the man.

A bit surprised, Peter had accepted her invitation and her employers’ address with a quizzical grin.

Sometimes the universe has a perverse sense of humor; sometimes fate makes jokes.

When the doorbell rang at eight o’clock, Anna and Regina opened the door, and Anna began laughing as Peter rushed in and gave her a bear hug, spinning her around like a child’s doll.

Regina stood stock still, watching as the children ran into the foyer and jumped into the fray.

Peter grinned over Anna's head at Regina. "I should have told you that you're working for my brother and his wife when you gave me the address. Honestly, though, it was too much fun."

From that first chance meeting Peter grew to be her first great love. He was intelligent and wise. Although he was only a couple years her senior, he seemed light years older. Peter had seen a lot of action as part of different U.N. peacekeeping missions. The events he had been a part of and the things he had seen had changed him.

Over several years he gradually spoke of his experiences, slowly unburdening himself of living nightmares that haunted him. She had never known someone who was so knowledgeable in the ways of violence and yet was so very gentle with his niece and nephews and with Regina herself.

They were married in a small ceremony four years after they met, Peter in his dress uniform and she in a simple, off-white dress.

"You are the best thing in my life, Reggie. I love you," he had whispered before kissing her in front of a handful of friends and relatives. It had been one of the best days she had ever known. She closed her eyes against the old familiar ache in her soul.

"He called you Reggie." It was not quite an accusation.

"That was a long time ago, Tommy - a lifetime ago and a world away."

He snorted impatiently for her explain. She could tell he was frustrated, but some things took time to tell. Some stories couldn't be told in five hundred words or less and still have the same meaning.

“Peter loved his country and he was proud to serve. He wanted to be a force for positive change in the world.” Tears fell and she wiped them away with the back of her hand. “I guess you could say he was an idealist. He always looked for the good, but he also had a very clear view of things. There was no grey area in Peter’s view of the universe.

Black and White. Good and Evil. Right and Wrong. It was beautiful and terrifyingly innocent at the same time.”

Peter wanted to serve and there was a need for him. He wouldn’t commit to the decision with Regina’s agreement, but she could see how badly he wanted to go. They had been trying for a baby, but that could wait - she was still young, with years ahead of her to be a mother; it was enough for her just to be his wife.

He held her close before he left - his brother taking him to the train - and called her Reggie again, told her how much he loved her, told her they were going to have so many babies they would have to add on three rooms for them all.

“So he got to call you Reggie.” Certainly an accusation this time.

“That was the last time.” Regina could see Tommy’s face out of the corner of her eye. He suddenly looked less sure of himself, less ready to argue about who called her what. “Peter never came back.”

“What did you do?”

“For a while I stayed. But sometimes people - other people’s families - they look at you and you know that it’s time to leave, that you don’t belong. I came back to the States, bumped around all over the place. Probably I should have sought counseling, but I didn’t want to talk about it. The universe had taken my love and my future and flushed it down the toilet. The last thing I wanted to do was get in touch with my feelings.

"I knew what I was feeling: lost, torn open, and royally pissed off. Pissed at the universe for taking him. Pissed at him for leaving me. Pissed that he broke his promise to come back to me. Most of all pissed at the sheer waste of his life. Here was a man who worked to make the world a better place, who didn't merely exist but was an active participant in his life, not some schmuck watching the world go by. He lived more in thirty-one years than most people ever do in an entire lifetime. And like that he was gone. The last thing I wanted was to talk about my feelings and I sure as hell didn't want to feel them."

Gina had met Michael in a little dive in Nebraska. He didn't care about her past, didn't even care about her future. Michael cared about the present and that was it. Michael lived in the moment, but not in the way Peter had. There were things Peter would not do; Michael had no such compunctions and did as he pleased. She was in over her head before she knew it with no clue how to get out. More than that, she didn't think she deserved to get out. They got married one night in Vegas. Then things had really become a waking nightmare.

She had known that he had a violent streak - he had thrown furniture across her apartment after she'd burnt an omelet she was cooking. After they were married, furniture wasn't the only thing he threw. He tossed her around like a dead leaf on the wind. Some days he beat her so badly she could only curl up in the fetal position on the floor crying. Half of the time she was afraid he would kill her. The rest of the time she hoped he would.

This is my penance, she told herself. He wouldn't have gone if I had asked him to stay or to take a different assignment.

She remembered the feel of Michael's hands around her throat. "Bye, bye, Reggie," he had snarled. Someone had reported him to his supervisor, someone had finally decided to stand up for Reggie.

The supervisor fired him. Michael wanted vengeance: he couldn't get his hands on the informant, but Reggie wasn't going anywhere. The calluses on his hands scratched against her skin, but that was nothing compared to what he was doing. Dimly she heard a commotion at the door. Far away she thought there might be yelling.

There was a noise and then his hands loosened. Rose petals fell on the floor and her face. "Reggie..."

Tommy had put an arm around her shoulders at some point and had pulled her close against him. He ran a gentle hand comfortingly over her hair and pulled the sheet up farther on her.

"I understand how slips happen. A couple times I've almost called you Peter. I'm sorry about that."

Her boyfriend looked at her through red-rimmed eyes, his face wet. How had she not noticed that? "I never knew. Why didn't I know? I should have asked."

"How could you have known? That's the past."

Tommy looked around the room. He glanced at the vacuum cleaner and then looked at the rug for a long time before he spoke again.

"We can't always fix everything that gets messed up, but we can try to move some things back into place. Like the rug: no more shapes. We can always try again if we don't get it exactly right the first time."

"We could do it together...Gina."



*Nate Gainer – What We Choose Defines Us*



## Shopping List

*Case R. Hemming*

Milk  
Eggs  
Sugar  
Antidepressants  
Sandpaper (Fine Grit)  
Couples therapy  
Bleach  
Debt counseling  
Disposable utensils  
Forgiveness from dead parent  
Baking soda  
Paper towels (holiday?)  
Bananas  
Avoidance of old acquaintances (home town)  
Funnel  
Hose  
Rope  
Answer to the 'whys'  
Pen  
Paper



Sydney Bardole - Mother and Child Reunion



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